



Students, teachers learn to collaborate and innovate with Agile training

by Bonnie Nicholls

It all started with a whiteboard outside the Rose family's kitchen in Florida.

Ricky Rose's dad, a software engineer, noticed his teenage son was having trouble focusing on schoolwork and brought home a well-known tool from the Agile world — a Scrum board. On it Ricky could list the tasks he needed to accomplish with sticky notes and then move them through the process of completion, across columns marked In Progress, Blocked, and Done.

Ricky initially thought it was another one of his parents' organizational tricks to get him to stay on track. But he quickly learned that it worked for his school assignments, fixing his car, even an Eagle Scout project.

"It's helped me organize the way I do things, because I'm a very disorganized person to begin with," he says with a laugh.

FLORIDA SCHOOL LAUNCHES
AGILE CLASSROOMS

Photo courtesy of John Gvazdinskas

TRUSTWORTHINESS WAY
CHARACTER COURSE

CARING STREET
CHARACTER COURSE

RESPECT AVENUE
CHARACTER COURSE

CITIZENSHIP LANE
CHARACTER COURSE

RESPONSIBILITY RD
CHARACTER COURSE

FAIRNESS BLVD
CHARACTER COURSE

That simple accountability tool and the greater Agile mission — collaboration and iteration among self-organizing teams — has found its way to Ricky's school, Grandview Preparatory School in Boca Raton, with support from Scrum Alliance.

The sponsorship included three days of training teachers and students in November 2016 by John Miller, a Scrum Alliance® Certified Enterprise Coach and the founder of Agile Classrooms. In return, Grandview will blog about the experience and share its success through a series of case studies.

Grandview's quest to create empathetic humans

Grandview teachers all refer to 21st-century skills as crucial to students learning and thriving in today's world, whether in school, at work, or in their personal lives. These skills include critical thinking, communication, collaboration, creativity, and empathy, which are key ingredients to fostering an Agile culture.

"The most important skills that are necessary for students are no longer knowledge or knowing how to do something or disseminating information," says Samuel Berey, Grandview's director of program innovation. Instead, they are those "intangible skills that are what make us human. If we're great at those, we have an opportunity to then become great at whatever we're passionate about."

It's no wonder, then, that Grandview was a good fit for Agile in the classroom. A K-12 college prep school with 276 students and 35 faculty, Grandview follows the design-thinking model. In general terms, design thinking is a user-centric approach to problem solving and innovation that espouses empathy, collaboration, and iteration. In Grandview's case, design thinking is student-centered learning in which teachers help students learn in innovative ways.

"We've always been thirsty for tools that will help teachers move away from whole-group instruction," says Jacqueline Westerfield, head of the school and an English teacher.

board meeting



WARNING

An Agile workplace may cause side effects, such as a personal life.



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Before the Internet, schools used to function as the primary source of information for young people, she explains. But now that sources of information are ubiquitous, schools have an excellent opportunity to be a place for students to practice and apply knowledge, come up with solutions, and see what works and what doesn't.

Rather than just teaching students to be good test takers and prepare for college admissions, she says, Grandview's "greater hope is that they're adaptable thinkers, and that they're empathetic humans, and that they're able to take information in whatever form it comes at them and best apply it in the world."

Grandview discovers Scrum and Agile

Grandview first heard about Agile from Susan Rose, the school's student achievement coordinator and Ricky's mother. When she saw how a whiteboard helped her son keep track of assignments, she thought it could be applied at school on a much greater level.

She and Aileen Palmer, Grandview's dean of faculty and director of professional development, did their research and decided Agile was the missing ingredient in the classroom. It would help make learning visible and give teachers and students guidelines for working in teams.

"It was a clear vision," Palmer adds. "We could see it happening. We could come in and it could be used with all grade levels, across subjects. It wasn't only specific to high school or just to a math class or just an art class. It was something we thought we could use across all age groups, subjects, and even with our own administrators and our staff so we could get things done."

Their research also turned up Scrum Alliance and Agile Classrooms. They began conversations with Miller, who requested that they create a five-minute video stating their case about how Agile could help their school. Knowing Scrum Alliance had interest in supporting Agile training in education, Miller contacted Scrum Alliance to aid his training in

Florida. Grandview became the perfect opportunity for a collaborative experiment.

Agile training an "eye-opener" for teachers and students

For the training, Miller worked with younger students and three teachers on the first day. Rather than simply lecturing, he acted as a facilitator to help them learn Agile by having them work on a mini-project. The students collaborated on the project, using Scrum boards to track their progress. They also gave each other feedback.

During the next two days, Miller worked with older students and a few teachers. This included a workshop to help them experience self-organized learning tied to 21st-century skills. For some participants, he describes it as jumping into the deep end of a pool.

"Not all teachers are ready for that, to work with self-organizing teams where the teacher is more of a facilitator and the students are choosing how they want to learn and how they want to approach learning. That can look like chaos to a lot of teachers at first."

Each team of teachers included a student representative to offer feedback as the teachers designed learning environments for their classrooms that incorporated student collaboration and self-direction. As teachers usually plan lessons without student involvement, that feedback was an eye-opener.

"Agile is about getting very close to the customer and having partnership and collaboration with them," Miller explains. The workshop embodied that, with students and teachers coming up with solutions together. "And the cool thing is how the students were saying, 'We're going to keep the teachers accountable to this because we really want this.' I find that once you get the students excited, it's really easy to get the teachers excited about it."

Susan Rose witnessed another collaboration miracle. She saw a successful, competitive student share that it was the first time he hadn't taken over and done everything himself while working in a small group.





He realized that he was able to work collaboratively — the kind of 21st-century skill Grandview teachers had been eager, but uncertain how, to teach before.

Plans to apply Agile at Grandview

Grandview teachers and administrators who participated in the training are already bursting with ideas. Susan Rose, for example, has a class of seniors starting internships in January. After five months, they'll report on their experiences.

"It's a very hard thing for them to go out and do this internship; learn something; and then in May show who they worked with, what they learned, and do a demonstration" for the school, she says. Agile will be a good tool to help them organize the process and stay on course by setting up checkpoints.

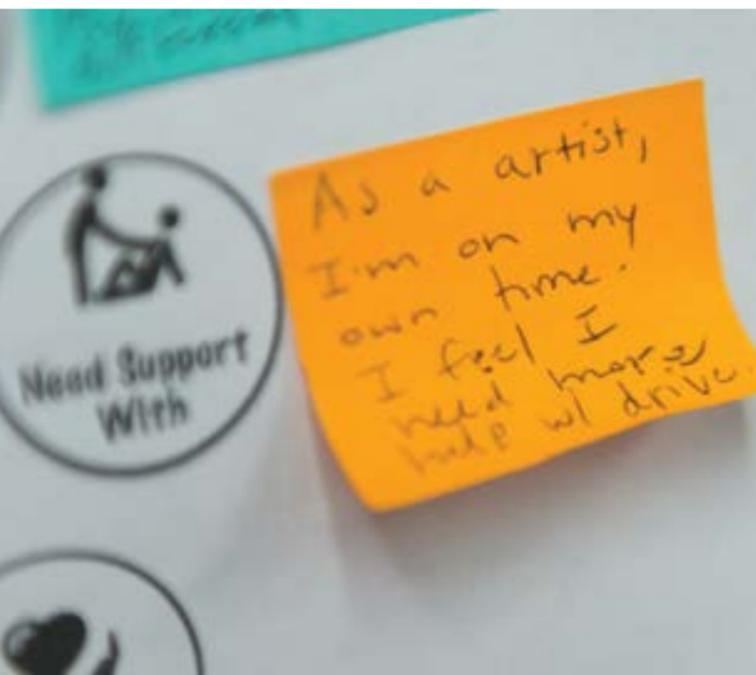
Westerfield says it will not only help the school deliver on its vision to personalize education but will also make that progress visible.

She and the school's teachers, many of whom also have roles as administrators, see Agile as a way to get things done by holding stand-up meetings and moving ideas to testing much faster.

Berey, the director of program innovation, says Agile is also a great fit for student "passion projects." These hands-on-learning projects, based on the students' skills and interests, require participants to create business plans for their ideas, present these to the Grandview administration and board, fundraise, involve the student body, and complete the project by the end of the year.

Some examples of high school passion projects include designing and building a music studio at the school and launching a school club focused on equal rights for all genders and marginalized groups.

The Agile model is great for the ideation and prototyping process involved in a passion project, Berey says. During the training, it really clicked for him. "I said, 'Boom, that's how we can utilize it right off the bat.'"



Photos courtesy of John Gvazdinskas

Ricky's job as a student advocate may be the hardest of all. A senior, he has limited time to influence his peers before graduating. However, he's up for the challenge. He plans to evangelize Agile in class, at lunch, and on passion projects where he says most new ideas at Grandview originate.

"That's where I'm going to have to start spreading the word, leading by example, and hopefully students do that with their classmates and then it grows exponentially from there."

Measuring success of Agile Classrooms

It's now on the shoulders of teachers and administrators to demonstrate to their colleagues how Agile works and how effective it can be.

Some teachers who attended the training planned to introduce it immediately to their classroom. This gives teachers who didn't attend an opportunity to watch and learn and then try it in their own classrooms.

"Some will be gung-ho and ready to go," Palmer says, "and others will need a little more time and support in the process."

Over the next few years, Grandview will measure success in a number of ways. One is how teachers approach the curriculum.

"It's already a success when you are open to learning, especially for adults, in any context, who like to be experts and like to be in charge of what they do," Westerfield says.

She admits that getting a veteran teacher to rethink his or her approach to teaching can be a challenge.

"We've worked with our teachers extensively, because we want the veteran teacher who knows kids, knows the curriculum, knows how to reach them, and has that talent. But we also want those soft skills — team collaboration and creativity — from the teacher side, the same thing we're trying to generate in our students."

For example, how well do teachers collaborate? How well do they innovate? How well do they accept failure as a step closer to success?

"Modeling that behavior is extremely important," she says. "Our kids need to see us learning. They need to see us learning constantly. That's a success criterion, just being vulnerable."

Miller is confident that Grandview will achieve its goal. Right away, he noticed that administrators and teachers were open-minded, flexible, and ready to make a change, even if they didn't quite know what that change was.

"But they had the right mindset behind it," he says. "They really want to prepare 21st-century learners." ●